

Same-Day Service

A dozen ideas to make the most of it

There has been a proliferation of one-day community service events during the last several years. Whether it's a "Day of Caring," a Martin Luther King, Jr. "Day of Service," or a corporate annual work-release event, non-profit agencies are faced with the challenge of creating and coordinating brief, but intensive, group volunteer projects.

Some resent this scatter-gun ap-

proach to service. They point out, with some justification, that one-shot volunteering rarely does more than address the simplest of problems, assuages the guilty feelings of people who cannot find the time to contribute their talents on an ongoing basis, and - worst of all - implies that sporadic bursts of energy are enough to solve serious community problems.

But one-time group service oppor-

tunities are very popular with volunteers and are here to stay. They meet volunteers' needs: a way to help with limited time; pleasant socializing that's "safer than a singles bar" or perhaps a great family activity with the virtue of teaching good citizenship. In an environment in which the majority of new volunteers express the desire for a short-term assignment, rather than an unending commitment, one-day events allow for giving as much or as little time as the volunteer wishes.

The good news is that there are benefits for the agency as well. First, there is ample evidence that partici-

pants in successful one-day projects often ask "What else can I do?" This makes the project an "audition" of sorts; the organizations that pass muster gain new recruits for more intensive volunteer work.

If nothing else, welcoming community members for a day of service wins friends for the agency - people who are likely to always feel some connection with the organization, perhaps becoming financial donors or returning to participate in some way as a consumer or client.

The most valuable aspect of one-day volunteer projects is that, ideally, the work performed meets real needs. Yet, this is the sticking point for many organizations. They do not know how to design service opportunities that are worth the effort, so that the outcome or results of the day pay back the effort it takes to manage the group activity well.

Because, traditionally, most organizations rely on ongoing volunteer assignments, they may assume that they "cannot use" one-time group help. A little creativity goes a long way.

Here are a dozen ideas to get your creative juices flowing.

1. Physical labor. Perhaps the most common of all the assignment categories. It's true that volunteers who come once for a few hours are often willing to expend elbow grease on jobs that group effort makes more enjoyable - and where the results are evident.

Beyond the clean-up and painting projects, think about tasks long on the back burner, such as sorting through old archives and boxes of "history." Or, if your organization serves meals, put the extra hands into the kitchen, chopping vegetables in large quanti-

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Beyond the clean-up and painting projects, think about tasks long on the back burner, such as sorting through old archives and boxes of "history." Or, if your organization serves meals, put the extra hands into the kitchen, chopping vegetables in large quantities for the week's salads or preparing food to freeze for use throughout the month.

2. Physical labor "plus." Why ask a group to do only one part of a job? If you need the recreation hall painted, why not propose that the group do a whole redecorating job? Some volunteers can paint while others sew or purchase new curtains, stencil a ceiling molding, recover the sofa, etc. Let the volunteers take some ownership of the look of the place - with your ultimate approval, of course.

3. Help client families. Most organizations focus on the client in need and rarely have the ability to do something for that client's loved ones. Why not ask a group of volunteers to offer a party or outing for these deserving folks, both as needed respite and to acknowledge their vital role in the well-being of the client?

4. Build your public relations file. Recruit volunteers to bring their cameras and take lots of pictures: slides, black and white photos, color photos, videotape. You provide the film and developing costs, they provide the equipment. Think of all the ways you might use a big photo file: for media

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On Volunteers

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publicity, your next brochure, in volunteer recruitment, at the next recognition event.

Consider various scenarios. For example, ask one group of photographers to shoot a "walk-through" of your agency. What would a client or a new volunteer see? Have another team shoot staff and volunteers at work, perhaps capturing all the steps of a recurring task that can later be used as a training tool. Even a group of amateur photographers will snap some photos you can use.

5. Community outreach. Schedule the one-day project to coincide with something like a shopping mall service fair. Volunteers staff the display, distributing materials about the organization. They also can canvas public opinion at the same time, surveying

shoppers on questions of interest to you.

6. Make teaching materials. Using old magazines, cardboard, and other craft supplies, let volunteers create learning activities such as memory books for Alzheimers patients or flash cards for reading tutoring.

7. Work ahead. So what if it's July? If you know you always hold a big Halloween party, get the group to make scary decorations in advance. In fact, it's often more fun to do things out of season. This also applies to working ahead on anything major in your calendar year: collating orientation packets for new students or collecting toiletries and other personal items into Mother's Day "shoebox" gifts.

8. Gather testimonials. This is an audio-taping project that can be done

alone or in conjunction with the photography projects already described. Send volunteers out with tape recorders to capture the thoughts of clients/consumers.

Everyone asks the same two or three leading questions and simply tapes the responses. If you fear that audio-taping without photos still violates confidentiality, have release forms on hand. These voices can later be used as the narrative accompanying slides in public service announcements, volunteer recruitment, orientation and recognition.

9. Critical input. Ask the group to sit down with all of your agency's printed materials - brochures, annual report, recruitment flyers, etc. - and critique them.

Using a checklist you prepare, have them rate the pieces for clarity, tone and other elements. Have them identify questions that are not answered in the materials.

10. Enrichment programs. Have volunteers take a group of clients on an outing that supplements your services. If you are doing vocational training, have the volunteers lead a shopping expedition to look for appropriate clothes for job interviews. Or, take literacy students anywhere that reading is required - which means just about anywhere. Go as a group, then pair up one-to-one for a

while to practice real-life reading skills.

11. Be the experts they are. If the volunteers are business people or students with an area of expertise, ask them to present a seminar, demonstration, or a hands-on workshop for staff, volunteers and/or clients. Some subjects: customer service skills; Internet research; trend forecasting.

12. Community resource study. This may be your chance to gather information about resources available to your clients with first-hand visits to facilities ranging from shelters to medical clinics to schools.

Ask volunteers to go to selected sites, complete observation sheets that you prepare in advance, and bring back the most current descriptive literature. They might also take photos to help staff and clients get a better sense of what these referral sources might be like.

What do you need that could be accomplished by intensive effort over a few hours? This list ought to have you thinking in many new directions.

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